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OO RUEHDE RUEHIHL RUEHKUK RUEHMOS
DE RUEHBC #0034/01 0731411
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
O 141411Z MAR 06
FM REO BASRAH
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 0270
INFO RHEHNSC/WHITE HOUSE NATIONAL SECURITY COUNCIL WASHINGTON DC
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHINGTON DC
RUCNRAQ/IRAQ COLLECTIVE
RUEHBC/REO BASRAH 0288

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BASRAH 000034

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 3/14/2016
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SUBJECT: SNAPSHOT OF MUTHANNA: POOR, PEACEFUL, AND TRADITIONAL

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REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

¶1. (U) Summary: Located in the far southeast of Iraq, the province of Muthanna is the second largest in Iraq in terms of size, but the poorest and least populated of all of Iraq's provinces. A fairly quiet region with few security concerns, Muthanna's residents call it the "peaceful province." Typified by a traditional society, tribal structure trumps political bodies in Muthanna. Nearly homogenous, over 95 percent of Muthanna's population is Shia Arab and holds conservative Islamic values, looking to Najaf and the Ayatollah Sistani for guidance on all matters. For the foreseeable future, Muthanna's concerns will, in all probability, be ones of economic development. End Summary.

Overview

¶2. (U) Muthanna province, located in far southwest Iraq, with a population of 622,351 and an annual median household income of 1,661,129 Iraqi dinars (approximately \$1107), is the poorest and least populated province in Iraq (Note: These are 2003 figures from UNDP and the Ministry of Planning Survey of 2004; published May 2005. End Note). Much of the population is concentrated in the provincial capital of Samawah (population 125,000), Rumaytha, and Kidhr (second and third largest towns). Both cities are located in the far north of the province on the banks of the Euphrates River. The rest of the population is scattered throughout the arid desert that borders Saudi Arabia. The ancient Sumerian city of Uruk, is located in Muthanna outside of Kidhr, and the Japanese government provides site protection assistance through UNESCO.

Security Situation: Uneventful

¶3. (SBU) Muthanna province has seen very few security incidents in the past three years, and is considered by its residents to be "the peaceful province" of Iraq. British and Australian forces, stationed at Camp Smitty, and Japanese forces, stationed at Camp Samawah, in Muthanna are there for reconstruction efforts. In November 2005, the British concluded a police-training program. Though there have been occurrences of rock throwing at Coalition vehicles, expressions of anti-Western sentiment, and the occasional mortar attack on the Coalition camps in Muthanna, these are isolated incidents believed to be undertaken by a small group of extremists and not representative of the larger population. Following a trend seen

in surrounding provinces, increased Jaysh al-Mahdi (JAM) activity and JAM-Badr skirmishes have resulted in a slightly less secure environment in Muthanna since February 2006.

Society and Culture: Homogenous

¶4. (U) Over 95 percent of the population of Muthanna is Shia Arab; there are estimated to be less than 5,000 Sunnis in the entire province. The Shia of Muthanna are conservative and traditional in their approach to religion and society. Women rarely venture outside, and when they do, they are always completely covered in black robes. No other major ethnic or religious groups are represented. A traditional tribal society is firmly ensconced in the province, with much of the population taking direction from their tribal leaders, who in turn look to Najaf for direction from Ayatollah Sistani. Indeed, the province of Muthanna is described as "looking to Najaf," and is more appropriately grouped with the provinces of Hillah and Najaf than with the other three southern provinces of Basrah, Dhi Qar, and Maysan.

¶5. (U) The results of the homogeneity and tribal structure of Muthanna are reflected in its voting patterns: over 98 percent of the population voted in favor of the constitutional referendum on October 15, 2005, and all five of Muthanna's seats on the National Assembly went to the Unified Iraqi Coalition (List 555) in the December 15, 2005 parliamentary election.

¶6. (SBU) Although there are a dozen or so distinct tribes in Muthanna province, the two most powerful and influential tribes in the region are the Al Hassani tribe and the Al Zayadi tribe. These two tribes control the provincial government and spar with each other for power. The Al Hassani tribe, of which the current governor is a member, is allied with the SCIRI/Badr party. Al Zayadi, on the other hand, is linked with the Office of the Martyr Sadr (OMS) political party and JAM.

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Economic Overview: Few Resources

¶7. (U) Muthanna province has the highest percentage of unemployment of all the Iraqi provinces at 32.7 percent and is among the provinces with the highest level of adult illiteracy at 41 percent. (Note: From UNDP and Ministry of Planning Survey of 2004; published May 2005. End Note.) Much of the population relies on government employment or agriculture for income. A large cement factory is located outside of Samawah, and a railroad connects Rumaytha and Samawah to the Dhi Qar provincial capital of Nassiriyah. Although much of the province is barely habitable, the banks of the Euphrates River are arable and produce wheat and rice. Tribes herd sheep and goats. Unlike the other southern provinces, Muthanna has no substantial oil deposits and few other natural resources to boost its economy.

¶8. (U) The poorest of the provinces, Muthanna nevertheless benefits from substantial donor investment. The Japanese government has invested \$220 million in water treatment units, health infrastructure, road rehabilitation, and electric power in Muthanna province. In December 2005, the National Embassy Team approved \$10 million in funds for projects in water, roads, and power. In March, the Iraqi government allocated 31 billion Iraqi dinars (about \$21 million) to the provincial government of Muthanna for projects in the education, sewer, and rural road sectors.

Shia Islamic Parties Dominate Politics

¶9. (C) The Islamic Shia parties of OMS, SCIRI and Badr Organization, and Da'awa are the most prevalent political parties in Muthanna. Currently, the Governorship and Provincial Council are dominated by the Al Hassani-backed SCIRI and Badr

Organization. The Chief of Police, Mohammed Najem Abd Swaidi, is non-political, although the Australian policy advisor at Camp Smitty estimates that JAM infiltration into the Iraqi police in Muthanna is as high as 80 percent.

¶10. (U) Tribal influence and power sharing among Muthanna's tribes takes precedence over regular elections and democratic processes. Regardless of election dates, the Chair of the Provincial Council rotates about every four months. In August 2005, Mohammed Zayadi (Independent; American citizen) was removed from the position of Provincial Council Chair and Kareem Ali Sajet (Fadillah; previously of Da'awa) was appointed Chair. In March 2006, Kareem was replaced by Sheikh Assad Abdul Amin al Duaine, an Independent Islamic Association member, former chair of the Religious and Society Committee, and a Shia imam. Sheikh Assad is also the brother of the Deputy Governor of Muthanna.

¶11. (C) BIO NOTE: The Governor of Muthanna, Mohammed Ali Hassan Abbas Al Hassani, (SCIRI), was a former Badr commander who fled to Iran during the Saddam regime but returned to Muthanna in 2003 as head of SCIRI. His heavy-handed and autocratic management style do not make him a popular public figure, but his ability to keep OMS and JAM militias at bay has earned him respect.

Comment

¶12. (SBU) The province of Muthanna, with its small population and lack of natural resources, will most likely always face the challenges of economic development and will probably always be in the position of requesting financial assistance, either from international donors or the Baghdad government. Although JAM shows signs of growing activity in Muthanna and may even topple the current SCIRI-led government, tribal structures will most likely continue to have the final word in provincial politics for the foreseeable future.

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